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ABSTRACT

The school environment is potentially discriminatory since acceptable avenues for the expression of a variety of interests are frequently prescribed in different ways for males and females. The deliberate segregation of the sexes according to preconceived notions of appropriate curricular activities is open to question. The author describes ways in which some school policies are biased in favor of one sex or the other, examines briefly the genesis of some of these policies, and highlights recent legislation that may lead to the eradication of the more egregious examples of sex bias in school policies. A short bibliography is provided. (Author/MLF)

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School Policies and Sex Bias

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SCHOOL POLICIES AND SEX BIAS

Obviously with a title so encompassing as 'school policies and sex bias', I will not be able to treat my subject in any great detail in the ten minutes allotted to me. Instead, what I should like to do today is first, to describe for you the ways in which some school policies are biased in favor of one sex or the other, second, to examine briefly the genesis of some of these policies, and lastly, to highlight recent legislation which may lead to the eradication of the more egregious examples of sex bias in school policies.

School policies affect both the students and the employees of a school district with equal potency. Policies establish who can be hired at what salary, who will be promoted to what position and when, who is eligible for which benefits, which students will take what courses, what the content of those courses ought to be, and which students will participate in sports and extracurricular activities.

The level at which such decisions are made varies by state. All fifty states have explicit constitutional provisions and numerous statutes and regulations which establish specific state responsibilities for the education of their citizenry. Thirty states in the union relegate responsibility for providing education through grade 12 to local school districts. Other states engage in modified forms of joint state and local control. (NEA, 1974)

Most state requirements address only a limited number of academic subjects and a few non-academic ones like physical education, health, and the practical arts. According to the National Education Association's Educational Research Service (1972), no states patently discriminated by sex in the specification of their curricular requirements although variations by state do occur in those curricular items specified as mandatory and those considered to be the option of local school boards and administrators. Decisions

about curricula and sexual composition of classes largely then become the prerogative of local authorities.

Who are these local authorities and what do they mandate? In 1973-74, 16,814 basic administrative school units were counted by the NEA (1974). This figure represents a reduction of approximately 46.9% in the number of units which existed in 1963-64, a reduction which becomes particularly significant if one examines the distribution of males and females in administrative positions available in 1973. Approximately 1% of all superintendents, 13.5% of all principals, and 12.5% of all assistant principals were women in 1973. These figures represent a reduction of approximately 2% since the last two year survey administered by the NEA (1970-71) and represent substantial reductions in the proportion of females in such positions during the past decade. Hence most of our local educational administrators now are men, i.e., most of the administrators lost over the last decade because of the reduction in the number of school districts were women. So most of our schools are run by men. And most of our school boards are composed of men. According to the National School Board Association, approximately 10% of all boards are women, and virtually all those women are housewives . (NSBA, 1974)

One can only speculate on what schools might be like if women held an equal proportion of such decision making positions as men. As it is we really do not need to rely upon speculation to describe current operating policies in most districts.

According to the NEA's biennial review of salaries conducted in 1972-73 (1973), men are paid higher salaries on the average than are women for all teaching and administrative positions. The major exception in the data is the junior high school principals category where women receive approximately $1,300 a year more than do men. Since the NEA's data are not broken down by such categories as tenure or number of years in the profession, it is difficult to ascertain the probable cause for this shift. Nevertheless, it is interesting

to note that male department heads receive approximately $2,000 a year more than women, male librarians receive approximately $1,500 a year more than women, and if one looks at the NEA schedule for salary supplements during the 1971-72 year (1972), one notes that coaches and intramural sports coaches receive supplements which range from a low of $554 to a high of $5,500 a year. On the basis of these data, one would have to conclude that male teachers and administrators receive higher salaries for their work than do their female counterparts. What happened to that old-fashioned homily, 'equal pay for equal work'? (Again, to be completely fair, I must stress that I do not have figures on tenure and longevity in the teaching profession, so one may speculate that male teachers, albeit a minority in the profession, may have taught longer than most women, and hence are more advanced on the salary schedules in their districts. Some unpublished data compiled by the Rand Corporation on teachers in San Diego, California does not, however, support this conjecture (1973), and the question remains an open one.)

I have only dealt with the most obvious forms of bias in school policies -- salaries are a matter of public record. I have not dealt with all the hidden and latent ways in which school policies may discriminate against the district's female employees. Who decides who is eligible to teach summer school (and hence be assured of a job over the summer)? Who controls which instructor will be invited to serve as an advisor to the student council (and hence receive an additional supplement to his or her salary)? Who decides which instructors will be eligible for in-service training conferences, for travel to professional meetings, etc.? Most of these decisions rest with either the department head or the principal's office.

Male and female students do not fare much better than their adult counterparts. School policies, in some instances, are blatantly biased against one or the other sex; in other instances, the bias is far more subtle and hence to some degree more insidious.

It was common practice, for example, in a Waco, Texas high school to require all black females to take a course in cosmetology until the Women's Equity Action League brought suit against the board. In an equally infamous case in Oregon, a judge ruled against a female student who had brought a suit against her school board when they refused her permission to graduate without the required course in home economics on the grounds that he thought all good women should know how to cook. (Robinson vs. Washington)

As is true in the case of the adults in the system, policies most manifestly biased against students are the easiest to document. Bias in prescribed vocational and physical education curricula, especially at the junior and senior high school level, for example, is relatively easy to document. Girls are told at an early age that boys are mechanically and scientifically inclined while girls are to excel at reading and language. These prescriptions are then vigorously reinforced when most students reach junior high school and are assigned either to a seventh grade shop or home economics class. Policies which establish tracking patterns for electives in senior high school settings are similarly biased. Boys who elect a vocational track acquire a series of shop and mechanical skills, while girls who make a similar selection prepare principally for a life as a wife and mother, a life which many economists have recently noted receives one of the lowest paying wages in the U.S. today.

Data available from the USOE's Bureau of Adult, Vocational and Technical Education (1972) substantially reflect this skewed sorting of students into "sex-appropriate" vocational tracks. Ninety-five percent of all students registered in vocational agriculture courses are men. These figures represent the beginning of a new trend, for in 1970 no females were enrolled in agriculture. The field of health has also recently experienced a shift of minimal magnitude. In 1965, males constituted 4.9 percent of those registered in health courses, as compared to 12.3 per cent of the health student population in 1971.

Male and female distributions in other categories for which the Bureau aggregates data conform to the same stereotypic pattern: ninety-three per cent of all students registered in consumer and homemaking courses are women; eighty-five per cent of those enrolled in those home economics courses designed to lead to gainful employment are women; ninety-two per cent of those registered in technical courses -- metallurgy, engineering, oceanography, police science -- are men; seventy-five per cent in office occupations are women; and eighty-nine per cent of all registered in trade and industrial courses are men.

Physical education classes also for the most part are segregated by sex and as such often establish different physical expectations for individual performance. All males are either expected to be athletic superstars or are expected not to play, while girls are expected to aspire to nothing more than a good intramural fray during girls' P.E. These expectations are frequently reinforced with substantially different financial allocations to boys' and girls' physical education programs. In fact, the allocation of money to support sports and physical education programs represents a very clear instance in which resources are allocated differentially on the basis of sex. Real discrimination in the allocation of time, financial resources, and physical facilities becomes most evident in junior and senior high school. The largest swimming pool, the best playing fields, the finest tennis courts are usually reserved for male sporting events. Most schools offer male students a sports program composed of varsity competition in football, basketball, baseball, track, swimming, and other sports. These activities are considered to be an essential element in the comprehensive educational package offered by the school. Coaches are hired, uniforms purchased, and facilities built. Such expenditures are considered to be legitimate line-items in a school's budget. Yet seldom does a school's budget reflect comparable line-item expenditures for a girls' athletic program.

Again I have not dealt with the more subtle ways in which operating school

policies may implicitly be biased against either male or female students. I did not explore the issue of counseling practices and the ways in which male students are encouraged to enroll in math and science courses while female students are often steered away from such courses. I did not raise questions about the content of subjects as portrayed by tests and textbooks. I have not dealt with the question of adult male and female role models in a variety of supportive and directive roles. Many school policies which establish what is to be taught to whom by whom are biased in their practice.

Please do not misunderstand me. I do not mean to imply that the cohort of male administrators or school board members who currently run our schools have consciously or intentionally pursued sexist policies. In fact, I think the genesis of many of these policies can simply be traced to tradition. Much of the structure and content of the American school system has evolved rather haphazardly over time and without grand design. I am simply trying to argue that there is very little that ought to be sacrosanct about that grand design, our schools and the policies which run them.

As many of you know, within the past several years, numerous pieces of federal and state legislation have been passed which prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex in federally assisted education programs. It is this legislation, particularly Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, which offers those of you who are concerned about the biases in existing school policies the tools with which to challenge these practices. Unfortunately, to date, H.E.W. has not released the regulations for the enforcement of Title IX. (For those of you who are interested, there was an interesting series of letters exchanged between Senator Charles Percy and Secretary of H.E.W. Caspar Weinberger which appeared in the Congressional Record on February 25, 1974. Percy was rightfully indignant that two years had lapsed since the passage of the amendments without an appropriate enforcement

mechanism established by the Department. Weinberger's last letter indicated that he hoped that the regulations would appear in the Federal Register in late February or early March. They haven't.) Even so, there are numerous steps which can be taken immediately to challenge biased practices in school settings. A logical first step would be to raised a series of questions with your school board and superintendent about local hiring and advancement practices, vocational and physical education tracking practices, and the allocation of resources for male and female student activities.

One last word of caution. Don't expect an instantaneous remission of sins. The next decade in education is going to be one of reduced enrollments, greater competition for jobs, a direct challenge to the tenure system by union's management and affirmative action plans, and a challenge to compulsory education by non-credentialed and non-accredited experiential learning systems. Besieged and beleaguered school boards and administrators will undoubtedly find it difficult to weigh trade-offs, to be responsive to various political factions, and to establish priorities for their action. This is precisely where each of you can be of assistance — supply them with the compliance models, the cost analyses, and the pedagogical alternatives which they will so eagerly seek.

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